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SURROGATE THEORIES OF ART

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Anyone who begins the study of aesthetics is likely to be overwhelmed by the diversity of theories men have devised to interpret their experiences of art. Indeed, it would seem that art means different things to different people, and that there is as little agreement on what art is as there is on the standards by which art is to be judged. Moreover, these two problems are not unrelated, for the lack of success in resolving the one has contributed to the failure in devising a solution to the other. Because of such widespread lack of accord, it might seem as if any attempt to say something new on the subject would be doomed in advance to the limbo of just another opinion.

Consider the variety of proposals that have already been made. Art, according to some, is an attempt to represent through the use of a sensuous medium the actual or ideal, the things we perceive or the underlying nature of reality, by imitating their appearance or their formal structure. Others view art subjectively as the manifestation of pleasure or emotion. At times art is interpreted as psychic symbol; at other times it is seen as the symbol of feeling. It has been construed as a mode of expression, and it has been rendered as a special language through. which communication can take place. It is a free, self-gratifying activity resembling play, the manifestation of the inner workings of the universal Will, or direct, intuitive vision. Moreover, each theory purports to give an exclusive and comprehensive account of what art is; each seizes upon undeniable features of art and casts them into a meaningful mold. It would appear almost as if the laws of logic were here suspended, and that all the explanations, however incompatible with one another, were collectively true.

Actually, no such startling move as repudiating logic is necessary in order to have aesthetic theory. We must rather conduct a critical examination of these various theories in the light of the phenomena to be explained in order to clearly appraise the proposals each makes. Once 'we have made such a comparative examination, it may then be possible to develop a comprehensive and systematic account of the data of aesthetics that retains the valid insights of previous attempts while avoiding their inadequacies. These inadequacies, as I shall attempt to show in this

essay, are of two somewhat related types. First, each theory commits the same methodological error in being partial to some of the data to be accounted for, yet offering itself as an exclusive and comprehensive explanation. But more crucially, each theory commits the identical logical error of equivocation by replacing the explanandum or what is to be explained with a surrogate that inadequately represents it. It is indeed possible to avoid these difficulties by observing clear and careful methodological procedures. But we shall better be able to indicate the direction of a sound theory in aesthetics after we have made a critical examination of some of the major theories already proposed.

The Criticism of Aesthetic Theory

The criticism of theory in aesthetics, like the criticism of theory in any other field of inquiry, may follow any of several quite different directions. A theory may be judged and most often is judged implicitly according to the different standards of the critic's own position, and on the basis of that position found lacking. A clear example of this is the repudiation of representational painting by formalists like Clive Bell and Roger Fry, who insist that the representational element in art is non-aesthetic. Yet their rejection of resemblance in favor of purely pictorial features like color, line, and composition is made on the basis of their own formalist theory and the sharp distinction they draw between emotions: about life evoked by the resemblance of forms to things outside art and aesthetic emotion that arises from the contemplation of the form itself. Imitation theory, however, which justifies the creation of representational art, claims resemblance to be of central aesthetic importance. Hence the criticism of imitation is made by means of an alien theory, one which consequently does not meet it on its own terms. The criticism of imitation from the position of a still different theory occurs when Eugene Véron derides the artist who is concerned with imitating as a person who is reducing himself to a copying machine. Yet this follows from Véron's emotionalist position, though, according to which the artist should attempt to express his individual feeling. Another illustration of this type of critical disputation is the denial that the artist's sincerity is aesthetically relevant on the grounds that to claim so is to commit the genetic fallacy. Yet clearly the defender of this position maintains it precisely because he is convinced that in this case not only is reference to the conditions of a work's creation pertinent, but that an account which ignores the artist's personality is by that fact erroneous. Still another example of this critical approach is the denial that contemporary tragedy exists as a dramatic form because no pertinent instance conforms to Aristotle's classic theory

of tragedy. Here, again, a theory of tragedy not followed by much contemporary drama is used as the basis for judging it inferior to classic drama.

A related type of criticism is that made, not from the standpoint of an alternative theory of aesthetics alone, but rather from a prior commitment to a position outside the domain of aesthetics entirely. A famous illustration of this is Plato's attack on art from the standpoint of theory of knowledge. For him, art can at best only imitate the appearance of things, which in its turn is but a reflection of reality, and so art necessarily falsifies reality since it is thrice removed from it. Furthermore the poet is also suspect, since he purports to convey profound truths which he actually does not comprehend, because he writes not from knowledge but solely from inspiration. Moral grounds for criticizing art also figure significantly. Plato's criticism of Homer for describing the jealous, lascivious, and criminal behavior of the gods is a case in point. So, too, is Tolstoi's moralistic attack on art which does not communicate the religious perception of the times. A similar direction is taken by theories that derive their support from a particular religious allegiance. Here artistic strictures are inferred from the doctrines or policies of a religious movement or institution, and art that does not conform to them is censured. As illustrations of this one can cite the implications for aesthetic theory as well as for artistic production of moral standards derived from Puritanism, by which art was regarded as frivolous and unworthy, and was therefore discouraged if not dispensed with entirely. Another case of the same kind of criticism was the promulgation of an official theory by the Council of Trent by which the practice, and by implication the principles which guided such practice, of composers of ecclesiastical music and painters of religious subjects was to be regulated by theologians so as to serve a strictly propagandistic religious purpose.[1] Related to this is the judgment of art in the Soviet Union by an official secular theory of political and ideological origins. Here the standard of the politically based theory of socialist realism is used to attack, on the grounds of their adherence to "formalism," artistic productions which fail to conform to the propagandistic uses they are expected to serve. This mode of criticism is undoubtedly the one most frequently encountered, and examples of it could be multiplied endlessly.

On the other hand, a position may be judged on the grounds of difficulties relating to its internal consistency or the adequacy of its concepts. This type of criticism is found less often than the previous type, but it

[1] Vide Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art,* Vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, n.d.), pp. 121ff.

has considerably greater logical justification. Here a theory is regarded as an integral whole, and the concepts and principles which compose it are analyzed in the light of their self-consistency and mutual compatibility. This procedure for judging a theory appears in the criticism of Suzanne Langer's proposal that a work of art is a presentational symbol or C. J. Ducasse's view that art is an immediate symbol. These terms have been attacked for being self-contradictory, since symbols mediate between an object and a knower, and thus by their very nature cannot be immediate or direct. Another example of this way of appraising a theory is illustrated by the criticisms that have been: leveled against the views of Véron and Tolstoi because of difficulties that develop out of their emphasis on the artist's individuality or sincerity as the main determinant of the value of his work. In this case such critical remarks do not deny the aesthetic relevance of individuality or sincerity but rather raise legitimate questions about our ability to determine whether or to what degree an artist succeeded in expressing his personality or was sincere. The observation that the only pertinent evidence of the artistic individuality or sincerity of a painter or writer lies exclusively within the work he has produced results in a virtual denial in practice of the usefulness of any reference to these traits at all, since to be interested in the artistic sincerity or individuality of the .creator is to be concerned not with the work but with the artist.

There exists yet a third alternative for the criticism of theory. It is a procedure encountered least frequently, perhaps, but it is the one which offers the greatest positive value. This type of criticism consists in judging a theoretical proposal, not on the basis of its internal consistency nor by the external standard of a quite different position, but rather in the light of some independent objective basis common to all theories in a given field. This common basis is the body of data which a theory is constructed to account for and which lies largely outside the conceptual framework of any theory. Such data are capable of being formulated into factual statements and ordered into a more or less comprehensive and organized arrangement by means of an appropriate theory. In the field of aesthetics, these data are the phenomena associated with aesthetic experience in its different connections, phenomena which form a relatively stable body of material wl1ich can be formulated by the various kinds of aesthetic facts that it is possible to identify. Here the arbitrariness of judgment is reduced to a minimum, for the independence of the data provides a firm support for the critical claims that are made. In this case, aesthetic theory is judged not only by its internal consistency and conceptual adequacy. It is judged as well by its ability to adequately explain the relevant aesthetic facts, to account for new data, and to offer a satisfactory solution to the peculiar problems that have constantly perplexed

every aesthetic theory. One instance of this is the objection voiced by Bernard Bosanquet and Joyce Cary to Croce's identification of artistic intuition and expression on the grounds that this does not take into account the creative activity of the artist, who must work on his intuited idea and embody it in the materials of his craft. Only then can he fix and preserve its meaning, but this takes much effort and skill.

It is this last mode of criticism that I shall pursue here. Rather than throw up our hands in despair at the multitude of conflicting accounts of art, we need only return to a common base from which to begin our inquiry, and proceed from there to incorporate into a sounder framework the insights that have gone to compose seemingly irreconcilable theories.

I contend that the major attempts to explain art fail to be entirely satisfactory and convincing because they commit a common error in being false to the independent data of aesthetics. Let me illustrate this contention by examining briefly some of the explanations of art that are proposed most frequently in order to show what this common failing is, and then indicate how aesthetic theory might proceed so as to avoid such a difficulty. I am not concerned here with offering a comprehensive account of each theory; hence, the partial descriptions which follow ought not to be regarded as parodies of entire theories. In identifying and dealing with what I call surrogate theories of art, I am interested only in extrapolating in every instance a primary feature which is central to each of these theories, and in showing how in every case these features function as surrogates for aesthetic experience, thus rendering inadequate and defective the theories in which they are leading elements. While many of the specific objections I shall make are already familiar, they combine here to form a critical judgment of significant generality. In following this procedure, I hope not only to contribute to the clarification and development of aesthetic theory, but also to prepare the way for a theoretical proposal that aims to avoid the common defect of the positions considered here.[2]

Imitation Theories

Those theories which interpret art as an attempt to provide an accurate representation of the objects and events we experience are undoubtedly the most obvious instances of surrogate theories. Art, according to the

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[2] Dewey embarks on a similar criticism of various theories of art that distort by seizing upon a particular aspect of experience in *Art as Experience* (1934), Ch. XII. The proposal suggested here is developed systematically in Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field* (Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, forthcoming).

imitation theories, must be "realistic" and depict its subject truly. The novel, the drama, the film must all be faithful: mirrors of life and provide an accurate portrayal of human events: the improbable must be excluded. So, too, must the fine arts clearly represent their subjects. A painting must be a recognizable image and look like whatever it is portraying; a statue must resemble its model. Fidelity to the subject of the work is the keynote.

Mimesis may, of course, assume various forms. It may demand exactitude of representation, literal accuracy, as exemplified in Leonardo's insistence that "That painting is the most praiseworthy which is most like the thing represented." To this end, the artist may try to portray things as they really are by recording their exact proportions and details. Alternatively, he may attempt to imitate their appearance, and consequently employ devices like perspective and modeling which are designed to create an illusion of reality, and which culminate in the techniques developed by the impressionists to better "imitate" the effects of light and atmosphere. Or as during the neoclassical period, mimesis may be directed toward depicting universal properties, the essential nature or form of things. Here the artist is selective in what he represents, revealing the universal in the form of a particular. This version of imitation, unlike the preceding, can be accommodated to provide an account of music, dance, and architecture. The mimesis in dance may be of idealized action, or it may take on metaphysical overtones in imitating the form of beauty by emulating its balance and harmony in musical forms and architectural structures. Again, as in the "theory of the affections" popular in Kant's time, music may be explained as imitating the diverse agitations of the soul.

Despite their apparent plausibility, however, mimetic theories no longer seem to offer a satisfactory account of art. In its more sophisticated versions, imitation proceeds beyond direct representation. By sanctioning illusion, it leads to the toleration of distortion, but in doing this places the realistic thesis of the theory in question. Moreover, the attempt to penetrate beneath the surface appearance of things directs imitation theories past perception into metaphysics, leaving outward resemblance far behind. Further still, a concern with the inward movement of a troubled soul ends by discarding any pretense of imitation in favor of more direct attention to emotion. And so, mimesis ends by replacing itself.

This is not the place for a full discussion of the theoretical difficulties of imitation theories of art. Yet from the viewpoint elaborated here, these theories suffer from a serious defect which follows from their very nature. By focusing the attention of both the creator and the perceiver beyond the work of art to the objects and events represented, mimesis interprets the activity of art as concerned with something outside the perceptual immediacy

of the aesthetic situation. The extra-aesthetic obligations of the representational object force it beyond the experience of art, and that experience is itself understood and appraised by being related to something outside of and apart from itself, namely, the thing being imitated. The point here is that the object being imitated acts as a surrogate for the inherently aesthetic character of the original experience. By leading the perceiver toward itself, away from the art work and outside the aesthetic situation, it substitutes a non-aesthetic object for the one that functions aesthetically. [3]

Furthermore, mimesis judges the artistic: product by standards of accuracy or literal truth. By employing cognitive perception as their model, imitation theories apply the post-analytic standards of the knowledge process to the pre-analytic experience of art. In this case, the cognitive object becomes a surrogate for the aesthetic object. Thus in both respects, aesthetic perception is replaced by a non-aesthetic surrogate, either by the object or from represented, or by cognitive perception.[4]

Emotionalist Theories

To seek and be guided by feeling in attending to art continues to be a motive popular among artists and their audiences alike. The affective force of art works is taken, too, as the standard by which they are judged. Widely held in diverse forms as emotionalist theories are, however, they commit an error which resembles that of the imitation theories, although they do so less in their own right than in the ways in which they are interpreted and elaborated.

That an emotional component can be discerned in the experience of art, as in the experience of almost anything, cannot, I think, be seriously

[3] Edmund Burke reveals the final inadequacy of the imitation theory when he admits that an audience would empty a theater in which a most elaborate tragedy was about to be performed, if they heard that a state criminal of high rank was about to be hanged nearby. Cf. *A Philosophical Enquiry...* (New York. 1958), p.47.

The complete antithesis of this occurs in Sartre's suggestive observation that '~Scu1pture suggests movement, painting depth or light. Calder suggests nothing; he captures and embellishes true, living movements. His mobiles signify nothing, refer to nothing other than themselves; they simply are, they are absolutes." *Essays* in *Aesthetics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1963), p. 79.

[4] My second argument here rests on the supposition that aesthetic perception is pre-analytic and therefore radically different from the cognitive process. While the substantiation of this claim is reserved for another place the view that art is non-cognitive is a central thesis of this essay. Here it is only necessary to admit. however, that art is different from the literal knowledge-gathering activity of the sciences. This is a much milder form of the thesis, and is rarely disputed today.

disputed. Moreover, in ascribing major importance to the experiential factor in aesthetics, emotionalist theories of art constitute a significant advance beyond the imitation theories. Yet this accomplishment is soon countered by the way in which the emotional side of aesthetic experience is described and misinterpreted by widely accepted explanations of how emotion functions in art.

The emotional ingredient in experience is but lamely described by general terms; like "joyful," "sorrowful," "exhilarating," "depressing," and "exciting." Anyone of these epithets might justifiably be applied to an indefinite number of otherwise remarkably dissimilar art works, and it helps but little to resort to strings of descriptive terms. Furthermore, the vocabulary in which we talk about emotions is impoverished in contrast with the richness of emotional experience. In ascribing a single such term or even a combination of them to a work of art, one succeeds more in misrepresenting and distorting than in characterizing it. How insipid is the description of a musical composition as sad, tragic, amusing or cheerful! Moreover, to select a single type of emotional reaction like pleasure is merely to seize upon a common kind of affective experience and generalize it to cover all cases of aesthetic response. Besides being uninformative, reference to pleasure unduly limits the variety and scope of aesthetic experience by confining it to a single facet of its emotional aspect. Nor is the difficulty overcome by referring to a peculiarly aesthetic emotion which is aroused by the significant formal relations of the work. To describe aesthetic experience as an occurrence characterized by an "aesthetic emotion" is to beg the question of its identifiable feature. It assumes that such experience is emotional in quality and yet tells us nothing positive about it, merely isolating a peculiarly aesthetic quality of the experience from other emotional tones of human experience, and maintaining that it is entirely unlike the emotions of "life."

At most, the explanation of art by means of one or many emotions offers but a partial account. The emotional element is just one factor that is discernible when the experience of art is reflected upon. Other features may be present, such as interest, recognition of motifs, forms., or ideas, acute perceptual awareness, intuitive insight, perception of relationships, and the like. Moreover, during the experience and before reflecting on it, the emotional component is fused with all the other aspects of experience. To characterize the totality of an experience by its emotional component is at best to indulge in synecdoche by mistaking a part of aesthetic experience for the whole experience; to do so at worst aborts it. In either case, emotion becomes a surrogate for full aesthetic experience.

Perhaps only by using a term with great inclusiveness, as when Suzanne

Langer employs "feeling" to mean "everything that can be felt, from physical sensation, pain and comfort, excitement and response, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or the steady feeling-tones of a conscious human life," [5] can one hope to avoid falsification. Such generality, however, makes feeling equivalent to the entire range of human experience of which we may become aware, and goes well beyond emotionalism. Furthermore, a notion as broad as this does little to help us account for the emotional quality of specific art works, nor does it yet explain the way in which feeling is manifested or the significance of art in human emotional experience. We are thus led to those theories which interpret art as expressing, communicating, or symbolizing emotion.

Expression Theories

One of the most common ways of accounting for art in current discussions is to explain it as a mode of expression. We often speak of a painting or a symphonic movement as being expressive, or we ask what the author, painter, or composer is trying to express in a work. Indeed, we sometimes wonder what the work itself expresses. Because of their popularity, the expression theories have received extensive discussion. It is not my object here to present a thoroughgoing critique of the various forms of expression theory. I do wish to raise, however, what seem to me to be crucial objections against any attempt to characterize art as expressive. For in whatever way they are formulated, theories of art as expression entail one or another kind of misrepresentation.

Art has been interpreted by expression theories as expressing different kinds of things. Some writers cite emotion, others ideas, and still others images as the things being expressed. Each of these proposals, however, presents certain difficulties.

Most frequently, perhaps, expression theories speak about the expression of emotion. Yet here we cannot avoid the conclusion that such a theory of art is unsatisfactory in that it misdirects our attention. For this version of expression explains art, not by the art object nor by the full experience of art, but beyond both either to the emotion being expressed (in which case our criticisms of emotionalist theories are pertinent) or to its source in the artist's impulses, motives, and needs. Either alternative, though, leaves us with a surrogate theory. The first does this by reducing the fullness of aesthetic experience to an abstracted emotional component, and the second by taking us outside art to the biography of the artist.

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[5] *Problems of Art* (New York, 1957). Reprinted in M. Rader, ed., *A Modern Book of Esthetics,* 3rd ed. (Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 1960), p. 249.

Sometimes it is argued, however, that art expresses ideas rather than emotions. Still, to say that art expresses ideas directs our attention away from the perceptual qualities of the aesthetic object and our direct encounter with it, and focuses instead on the belief being expressed. This shifts our interest from the features which make our experience of art intrinsically and uniquely interesting, and occupies us with matters quite independent of any aesthetic concern. Did Brutus really betray Caesar, as Shakespeare suggests? Was the massacre on the third of May, 1808, an actual event, and was it as savage and unjust as Goya's painting depicts? Were the conditions of human life as stark, exploitative and dehumanizing as realistic painters like Millet and naturalistic novelists like Harris, Dreiser, Zola, and others described them? Here cognitive standards of truth are relevant, and our concern is not with art as art but with the sifting of evidence and the validity of inference so as to arrive at accuracy of belief. Again a surrogate for art enters in the form of ideational meaning and truth, and we are led away from aesthetic responsiveness to matters of historical and social fact.

To say, finally, that rather than expressing emotion or ideas, art expresses images in any literal sense, leads us to interpret art through its effect on the imagination. This tends to take us away from the art object and beyond aesthetic perception to the images the art work excites. Now it is undeniable that imaginative processes playa necessarily large role in the experience of certain arts. Literature, in particular, relies heavily on an imaginative response. Yet it is equally undeniable that the images stimulated, especially in connection with other arts, are frequently irrelevant to the art work that acts as stimulus. Music and painting are all too often used merely to set in motion a train of daydreams or fantasies which have no connection with the art objects that excite them. Their imaginative appeal here revives difficulties similar to those from which imitation theories were seen to suffer. For by directing our attention away from experience centering on the art object, the images act as surrogates for aesthetic perception.

Furthermore. there are some general difficulties which all versions of the expression theory entail. This manner of accounting for art focuses: on only a part of the situation in which art occurs. It calls attention first to the art object in an attempt to understand its expressive qualities. Yet by its interest in the expressiveness of the object, this theory moves quite naturally to the origin of such qualities, and thus tends to lead us still farther away from the art object, centering our concern more with its genesis and the artist who created it than with the object itself. Here expression becomes the combined result of the intention of the artist and

his productive activities. But in doing this, the expression theory incurs in some measure the intentional fallacy and, more generally, the genetic fallacy. By directing attention to the origin of the art object and to the artist's expressive motives, a surrogate is introduced for the functioning of the art object in the aesthetic situation. Etienne Gilson put the point well when he observed, "What makes self-expression beautiful is not that it is expression, but rather that, taken in itself, it is a thing of beauty enjoyable for its own sake." [6]

Yet our aesthetic concern is properly with art rather than biography, and the farther we remove ourselves from the art object and the situation in which it functions, the more distant we become from any strictly aesthetic interest. Even by returning to the object of art so that we may examine it for its expressive clues, the difficulties with this theory remain. For we well may ask, How can art *express* anything? Without going into semantic details, are we not speaking metaphorically here of aesthetic experience? Is not calling an object expressive simply a way of testifying to the effectiveness with which the work functions in our experience? Clearly, to speak of an *object* as being expressive or as expressing something is to interpret it animistically. The *object* is not expressive nor is *it* expressing anything; it is *we* who regard it as possessing great import. The object itself simply is. And so expression theories oblige us to return to the experience of art.

Communication Theories

These difficulties are not overcome when art is interpreted as communication rather than expression. This approach encompasses a wide variety of positions, from Croce's subsumption of art *as* an intuitive expressive activity under the general theory of linguistic to the popular description of music as "the language of the emotions." While all such attempts to provide an account of art do see it as a species of human activity, they fail to supply a satisfactory explanation of the distinctive features of the experience to which it gives rise. For they assume that art performs the same kind of function that language does, and by interpreting the aesthetic activity as a communicative one, the experience of art is again replaced by a surrogate. This is because language is a device for the embodiment and communication of meaning through the use of symbols. Except for special occasions, language is rarely reflexive. Its value is preeminently instrumental. Intrinsically, language is relatively unimportant, and it seldom concentrates attention on itself except when

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[6] *The Arts of the Beautiful* (New York: Scribner's, 1965) p. 61.

it is used as an artistic medium or becomes the subject matter of a linguistic science or philosophy. How different is this from a description of the function of art. Whereas language points beyond itself, the art object plays a key role in aesthetic experience and becomes the focal point of intrinsic perceptual awareness. Indeed, the explanation of art on an analogy with language is one of the most widespread, and one of the most mendacious, theories; it distracts us from the aesthetic and leads us to expect from art that which it is least capable of supplying.

Those theories which seize on the surface resemblance of art to linguistic activity invariably attribute meaning to art. Yet again, in any literal sense, this is foreign to aesthetic experience. To say that a painting or a sonata has meaning refers at most, not to the work itself, but to the perceiver's response. It is nothing more than what the percipient projects onto the art work. To speak of meaning is to refer literally to a cognitive feature; any other sense is metaphorical. Yet if anyone should seek information from a poem, we would not regard him as exhibiting an aesthetic interest or response. Indeed, cognitive meaning is generally regarded as being embodied in statements or propositions, and these are independent of specific languages and their peculiar traits. But in art it is the individual, unique characteristics which are indispensable. Whatever meaning an art work may be said to have is inseparable from these features. As. A. C. Bradley so well expressed it, the poet "meant what he said, and said what he meant. . . Meaning they [a Beethoven symphony or a Turner picture] have, but *what* meaning can be said in no language but their own." [7] Any change in the work changes its meaning. Furthermore, Bradley denies meaning in its literal, cognitive sense.

Moreover, those attempts to rescue the notion of meaning by construing it in an emotive rather than a cognitive sense also fail to satisfy. Besides encountering the difficulties of the emotionalist theories, the reference to emotive "meaning" is at best metaphorical. It reveals the pervasive presence of an intellectualist bias which insists that emotion be construed in cognitive terms.

To attribute meaning to art calls attention at most to its importance, to the significance of the experience to which art gives rise. But reference to meaning in art, like reference to language, tends to be misleading and ends by replacing art with a surrogate. Art, however, must be taken on its own terms. Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica" captures this insight, especially in its famous lines, "A poem should not mean/But be." [8] It is what it is as it is. No more, no less.

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[7] *"Poetry for Poetry's Sake,"* reprinted in Rader, *op. cit.,* p. 321.

[8] *Collected Poems,* p. 41.

Symbolic theories of art offer perhaps the most salient examples of surrogate theories. While employed with great ingenuity and considerable insight by Cassirer, Panofsky, Langer and others, art, when interpreted as symbolic form, becomes the emissary of meaning. Here again art leaves the aesthetic and enters the realm of the cognitive.[9] This is equally true of all such theories, whether art be taken as the symbol of the artist and his times, as a religious symbol, as an emotional symbol, as a psychoanalytic symbol, or as a poetic archetype.

It is curious ,to observe the various: ways in which the need to attribute meaning to art results in the ad hoc attachment of symbolic significance to it. I. A. Richards, even while recognizing the prior importance of the sensory aspect of most poetry, interprets poetry as mainly the evocative use of signs, particularly by means of metaphors.[10] Langer's suggestion is perhaps more tenable when she describes art as an extended metaphor or prominence to the directness of the aesthetic response, is drawn into the immediacy of experience.[11] And yet the closer Langer comes to relating art to the direct perception of experience, the less art functions as a symbol and the more it asserts itself in its own right. The commitment to a communication theory combines with the awareness of the direct immediacy of aesthetic experience to lead her to the ironically self-contradictory notion of art as a presentational symbol. And even Ducasse, who gives prominence to the directness of the aesthetic response, is drawn into the same odd posture when he interprets the aesthetic object as the "immediate symbol" of an emotion, so embodying it that we receive the "taste" of that emotion by directly apprehending the symbol.[12]

Theories of art which employ the notion of a symbol, as in those developed by Langer and Ducasse, so distort the usual meaning of symbol

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[9] This is clearly illustrated in Panofsky's analysis of meaning in painting into four layers: recognizable objects and events (recognition involves an associative process of cognition, relating past learning to present experience), the style of a period (distinguishing style requires a body of scholarship which must be employed in the cognitive process of analyzing a work), allegorical figures or types (awareness of universal types requires the use of abstractive techniques), and finally the intrinsic, philosophical significance which embodies its symbolic function (this involves fitting art into the schema of a philosophic system). Cf. *Studies in iconology* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 16. According to the criticisms developed in this essay the significance of painting on each of these levels lies outside the object and the experience it elicits.

[10] "Many if not most, of the statements in poetry are there *as means* to the manipulation and expression of feelings and attitudes. . . " *Practical Criticism,* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1929), p. 186.

[11] *Problems of Art,* in Rader, *op. cit.,* pp.254-255.

[12] *Art, the Critics, and You* (New York, 1944), p. 179.

that they appear more concerned to defer to the common association of art with meaning that so typifies aesthetic intellectualism than to be controlled in their account by the experience they are supposed to explain. [13]There is a directness to the experience of art which the more perceptive symbolic theories feel forced to acknowledge, and it is this immediacy which is incompatible with describing art as language or symbol. The linguistic theory of Croce reflects the identical influence, for he makes much of the intuitive individuality of aesthetic forms and emphasizes the untranslatability of aesthetic expressions.[14] What Langer and Ducasse seem to be saying in a circuitous way is not that art functions as a symbol ordinarily does, but rather that the art object is not complete and self-sufficient in itself. It must instead be regarded as a factor in the larger context of experience. This observation is both correct and important, but it is misrepresented by a theory that through its literal content removes the art object from the involvement it properly has in aesthetic experience. At best these descriptions are merely suggestive metaphors, but there is no place in theory for metaphor. A theoretical account properly should provide a literal explanation. As a whole, then, the communication theories are surrogate theories. They commit the error of confusing the reflective analytic, symbol-using attitude and activity with the inherently non-cognitive aesthetic.

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[14] Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic* (New York, 1958), pp. 67, 68.

Formalist Theories

I believe it can readily be shown how all the major theories of art embroil: themselves in difficulties similar to those just described. It is not necessary, however, to provide an exhaustive account of all such theories to establish the point of my criticism. Let me conclude, then, with a final example of a surrogate theory, a theory to which it might seem difficult to object because it, more than any I have discussed so far, endeavors to explain art on its own peculiar terms, and thus arrive at a more authentic statement than earlier theories of what art is about.

Formalism came as a revolutionary corrective to a history of misleading and unquestioned assumptions about art. Never before had the representative character of the graphic and plastic arts so been challenged, at least in theory. Yet Roger Fry, Clive Bell and others insisted on the startling position that the representational element in art was non-aesthetic and, indeed, that it distracted the perceiver from the genuinely pictorial qualities such as line, color, mass, and plane that he ought properly to be concerned with. Several decades earlier, Eduard Hanslick had applied a similar standard to music, insisting that the listener occupy himself exclusively with musical elements like sound and motion, and not use music as an emotional stimulus. Most recently, the New Criticism in literature also bears an affinity to the same general position in its emphasis on the literary use of language with its levels of meaning, its associations, rhythms and formal arrangements. Despite the importance of its insights, though, formalism establishes both too much and too little.

Formalism developed as an attack on and an alternative to the pervasive influence of the imitation theory and its condemning application to modem nonrepresentational art. In rejecting representation entirely, however, formalism construed it exclusively in terms of a theory of simple imitation. Yet it is possible to keep the entire recognizable image within the painting itself and to regard its significance as wholly determined by its place in the painting. Instead of representation or resemblance, which imply reference to something outside the painting that is reproduced in it, we can speak rather of presentation or semblance, in which the image is viewed in its own right and not primarily as a sign of something else. Certainly one can regard recognizable images as doing more than recording appearances or reminding one of outside associations. Within the painting the image is something quite different from what it would be when regarded only as a reminder. It may function to inform and enhance the total perceptual effect by introducing ideas, associations and feelings that are transformed in being embodied in an art object, and

which add to and benefit from the peculiarly painterly qualities of the medium.

Hence formalism excludes from the data of aesthetics much that need not be' cast out on aesthetic grounds. While it is certainly not true that all art should be representational, it does not follow that the converse of this, that representational painting may be art, is likewise false. Representational art may be aesthetic in that very respect. The range of objects aesthetically regarded includes both. Formalism then establishes more than it need. It is sufficient to justify abstract art without excluding the representational in the process. One difficulty with formalism, then, is that the nonrepresentational form becomes a surrogate for the whole range of aesthetically perceivable images.

Formalism also errs in proving too little. In their anxiety to restrict attention to purely artistic elements, the formalists, together with sympathetic minds from literature and music, seem inclined to focus almost entirely on the art object. Their attention is wrapped up in the pictorial qualities of the painting, the literary features of the poem or novel, or the structural components of the musical composition. Certainly this is an improvement over a theory such as emotionalism, in which the art object is apt to be forgotten in the concern with the feelings of the person appreciating it.

The insistence that we confine our aesthetic attention to the painting, poem, or musical work, per se, is unduly limiting, however. That they should be the center of the perceiver's attention does not mean that other factors may not play an important role in our appreciation of art. There are connections with experience beyond the perception of form alone that may be aesthetically relevant. The art object does not exist in a world by itself; it rather occupies a place in the broad matrix of human experience. Art's indictment of social evils, its commentary on human relationships, its championing of new ideas and causes all suggest connections more inclusive and profound than the formalists are willing to admit. Theirs is an inverted romanticism that would keep out the philistine fingers of culture, history, and technology from the sacred grove of art.

It might seem that Bell and Fry have corrected any overemphasis on the painting by their introduction of a peculiarly "aesthetic emotion" in the perceiver as an indication that a painting possesses "significant form." Unfortunately this lays their position open to the criticisms of emotionalism that we have already detailed. For this singular and rare emotion fragments the experience of art, cutting it off from the breadth which that experience can assume. It restricts aesthetic experience in a manner precisely parallel to the way in which it would confine our aesthetic perception

to the formal elements in a work of art. We must conclude, then, that in this respect, too, formalism is a surrogate theory. It replaces the full scope of the social origins, experience, and relevance of art with a sacrosanct object protected by the hallowed walls of the museum and nurtured in the sensitive soul of the esthete.

Contributions of the Surrogate Theories

Despite the force of these criticisms, it is not my contention that all the theories examined here, while misleading, are entirely false. Indeed I am ready to recognize their individual merits, for theories that have been taken as seriously as has each of these by so many perceptive minds cannot be summarily dismissed. Each, in fact, contains a true and important insight. Yet because this observation is part of a surrogate theory, it is obscured and often misinterpreted. It would be useful at this point to suggest in a preliminary way where the contribution of each of these theories lies.

In the imitation theories, it is not nature, appearance, or reality which must be slavishly emulated. Art, nonetheless, must be "true of life" in that it must bring us into direct contact with the immediacy of our experience. Art is not the occasion for an isolated esoteric mode of response, open only to the initiate and unconnected with anything else. The encounter with art is more than a magical escape from life; it is more than a peculiar sort of occurrence, independent of the remainder of human interest. On the contrary, successful art evokes a response from the reservoir of man's readiness to react to the events in which he is involved. Art, indeed, has a deep and important connection with the life of man. Obviously this varies with the particu1ar art and with the style or movement being considered. Nineteenth century realism in literature, for example, emphasizes the closeness of this relationship, and Georg Lukacs' observation was a perceptive one when he noted that "Great literature. . . reveals a 'piece of life' providing more truthfu1 and more profound reflection of reality than is generally obtained in ordinary life." Clearly the same rationale holds for those arts embodying social criticism. Pop art, to take a recent example, rests entirely on this connection with the experiences of popu1ar cu1ture. It can best be understood not for its formal qualities but for the implied social criticism of its subject matter. In this respect it succeeds admirably in forcing us to see the oppressive vu1garity of our commercial culture. It is even true that the sensory awareness of the most stylized and abstract art objects conveys associations for us. This is acknowledged by even the most ardent defenders of modem nonrepresentational art. Ortega y Gasset admits this when he observes that "perhaps in the most abstract

ornamental line there vibrates as in disguise a tenacious reminiscence of certain 'natural' forms." Even Roger Fry, after vehemently attacking representational painting and arguing for the aesthetic relevance of only formal qualities, comes in intellectual honesty to admit a tenuous connection of art with the emotions of life.[15] There would then seem to be an intimate connection that art has, not necessarily with the appearances of things, but rather with our *experiences* of them. Art can intensify the rest of human experience, and this experience can, in turn, enhance the significance of art. It is the whole man that experiences art, and art influences the whole man.

The insights of the other theories we have considered are more obvious. By involving the personal human response as an essential component of the aesthetic situation, the emotionalist theories have provided a contribution of signal importance in the understanding of art. Art can hardly be understood with any accuracy apart from the way it functions in human experience, and the emotional element in experience is clearly undeniable. The emotionalist theories, then, rightly move us away from any position that would elevate and eternalize art objects by removing them from their dependency on experience. They return art squarely to its human setting.

Finally, the theories of art as expression and communication make us aware of the fact that art involves much more than subjective experience. Art is a social event. It possesses social significance through the community of human experience. This is an essential factor in the understanding of art, one which no comprehensive theory can afford to overlook.

There is, then, significant merit in each of these theories. In each case, however, the insight is obscured by the surrogate character of the way the theory is developed. It is clear, however, that a full account of art must retain these insights while at the same time avoiding their distortions.

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15 "Now, from our definition of this pure beauty, the emotional tone is not due to any recognizable reminiscence or suggestion of the emotional experiences of life; but I sometimes wonder if it nevertheless does not get its force from arousing some very deep, very vague, and immensely generalized reminiscences. It looks as though art had got access to the substratum of all the emotional colors of life; to something which underlies all the particular and specialized emotions of actual life. It seems to derive an' emotional energy from the very conditions of our existence by its relation of an emotional significance in time and space. Or it may be that art really calls up, as it were, the. residual traces left-on the spirit by the different emotions of life, without however recalling the actual experiences, so that we get an echo of the emotion without the limitation and particular direction which It had in experience." Roger Fry'; *The Hogarth Essays,* 1924, -"The Artist and Psychoanalysis."

Beyond Surrogate Theories

It is possible' to discover in the history of aesthetic theory a growing tendency to handle the phenomena of art as the subject of inquiry that is autonomous. The sequence of theories that have been proposed is not a circumstantial sequence but rather a developmental one. It can be seen to reflect the cumulative development of our understanding of aesthetic perception. The earlier theories like mimesis to confuse the aesthetic function of recording appearances and historical events, and preserving and communicating information.[16] This continued even when the imitation was idea, rather than real, for art then served the purpose of leading men to the apprehension of a higher, spiritual order of being, and impressing upon them a moral ideal. The rise of the emotionalist theories signified that art was more important than before, that it was doing something nothing else could do. These theories recognized the place of originality and creativity. They discovered the personal element in artistic perception and the intrinsic importance of the experience of art. For the first time art was seen as something valuable in its own right which had to be regarded disinterestedly. By stressing the role of the creative artist and the personal response to art, the emotionalist theories led to the emancipation of the artist and perceiver from the manifestly non-aesthetic concerns of the imitation theories. Yet emotionalism swung theory too much in the opposite direction so that it became excessively concerned with matters of personality, motives, biography, and other questions of psychological and historical interest. Thus the advent of formalism served as a corrective by directing our attention back to the purely aesthetic features of the art object. Whereas emotionalism led to the emancipation of the artist, formalism achieved the emancipation of the art object and its medium. Now the object had become independent and had to be regarded for its purely artistic qualities.

This succession of theories clearly does not present a series of logical alternatives for the explanation of art. We have already noted in the preceding section how each can be seen to contribute its own peculiar insight into what art is about. Yet the sequence of theories reveals a highly significant trend toward interpreting art on its own terms, toward freeing it from subordinance to religious, moral, cognitive, and political influences, and is therefore of considerable significance. Yet the emancipation of aesthetic theory is still far from complete. The way in which art is approached, the fashion in which it is described, and the manner in which

[16] This is aptly illustrated by the observation in Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* that "The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing."

it is interpreted all testify, as we have tried to show in this paper, to the incompleteness of its liberation.

Undoubtedly one of the greatest difficulties in interpreting the nature of art results from the need to give a clear description of a mode of experience dissimilar in certain key respects to every other. It is this difficulty which leads the most widely held theories to account for art, not on the basis of our experience of its own traits, but by relating or identifying it with other kinds of things more clearly understood and more easily designated. Just as animistic explanations of physical events were used before the advent of modem science to account for the new and strange by interpreting them in the manner of human actions which were more familiar, the phenomena of aesthetics have thus far been described the commonly recognized but non-aesthetic terms of imitation, emotion, language, and the like. Surrogate theories, however, do an injustice to art by reducing aesthetic experience to non-perceptual, literally non-aesthetic modes of experience, or to stereotyped and limited kinds of experience. Perhaps because these theories are discursive attempts to formulate the inherently non-discursive experience of art, they fail to take proper account of the peculiar features of aesthetic experience, translating it instead into other, more readily identifiable kinds of experience which differ from the aesthetic.

Of course one may object that every theory is an attempt to codify experience into recognizable types. Why, then, should aesthetic theory be castigated merely for doing the same? The objection lies not with aesthetic theorizing per se, but with the failure to apprehend the characteristic traits of aesthetic experience by reducing it to alien modes. An account of aesthetic experience is a separate task, and we must also make sufficiently clear the case for a distinguishable kind of perceptual experience associated with art. And if only the identity of aesthetic experience be granted, the force of the criticisms presented here is undeniable. A mode of experience distinguishable from other kinds can hardly be adequately represented by them.[17] That is why attempts to interpret art as feeling,

[17] I emphatically disclaim any intention of subscribing to what I. A. Richards has termed "the phantom aesthetic state." (Cf. his *Principles of Literary Criticism,* Ch. 2). While convinced of the identity of an aesthetic mode of experience, I do not hold that it is a rarified condition discontinuous with any other. Quite the contrary, I am convinced that the experience associated with art and aesthetic value shares many features in common with other kinds of experience and that it is not only continuous with but pervasive in the perceptual activities of men. Indeed, when we direct our attention primarily to the experience rather than the object and materials of the arts, we are led to discover the continuity of the aesthetic mode with other kinds of experience and to recognize the ubiquity of aesthetic perception in human life.

as emotion, as pleasure, or as form do injury to the richness and inclusiveness of aesthetic experience when they merely abstract a commonly recognized facet of experience and ascribe it to art.

That is why theories that interpret art as mimesis, as a means of expression, as a language for communication, or as a symbol are misrepresentations, for these all interpret the experience of art as ultimately referential, as being like or about something other than itself.

Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Experience

Certainly I am not suggesting that all efforts to theorize about aesthetics are cursed. Nor am I implying that, since aesthetic experience is pre-analytic, it cannot be inquired into. My criticisms are directed toward the failure to theorize by treating aesthetic experience in the light of its own distinctive characteristics rather than like radically different modes of experience. I am proposing, instead, that aesthetic theory become genuinely empirical, that it be guided not by prior commitments or pre-conceptions from outside aesthetic experience but by the intrinsic qualities of such experience, and that it study man's aesthetic experiences in their characteristic situations. One important consequence of this approach to aesthetic theorizing is that we must reject those interpretations that displace the distinctive experiences of art by reducing them to a mode of experience different from the aesthetic. We must put aside theories of art with animistic and biographical overtones, like expression and communication theories. Finally, we must dispense with all surrogates for aesthetic experience. While these may have some explanatory value, they are solely metonymical and ought to be replaced by a literal account of aesthetic experience. Speaking analogically, what is needed is the reformation in aesthetic theory that would be achieved by supplanting the priesthood of the surrogate theories by the Protestantism of direct communion with experience that art is capable of furnishing.

It is not sufficiently recognized that aesthetic theory is, literally speaking, meta-aesthetics. If the major importance of the perceptual aspect of aesthetic experience were properly acknowledged (as is suggested by the etymology of the term "aesthetics" - *aisthesis,* meaning sense-perception), we should come to realize that aesthetic theory is talk about a kind of experience which such talk itself is not. Yet this condition is not peculiar to aesthetics. It is the case with the natural and behavioral sciences, too. Only in linguistics, semantics, the philosophy of logic, methodology and theory construction is this not so. Perhaps the problem here arises out of the attempt to render in concepts what is actually a recognizable type of experience that is itself of quite a different order. Indeed, as I suggest

elsewhere, a large share of the difficulty lies in the fact that aesthetic experience is non-conceptual, and the discursive nature of language is foreign to the non-discursive nature of art. Thus the failure to distinguish clearly between aesthetic experience and the theory of aesthetic experience has led recently to skepticism in some quarters .about the very possibility of aesthetics, since it may seem impossible to get at the nature of art without ending up with a closed definition that cannot do justice to the limitless variety of the experience of art. And it is not difficult to understand also why the artist, by his precognitive reliance on the totality of perceptual awareness, is drawn often to express his experiences in the evocative language of the metaphysician or the mystic.

The conclusion that may be drawn regarding the ways in which art has been theorized about is that the study of aesthetics has not proceeded beyond a preliminary stage. Aesthetic theory still, for the most part, looks outside the experience of art to explain art. Most theories replace aesthetic experience with a surrogate, and while doing this may serve to alleviate puzzlement, they do this at the expense of accuracy. Yet it is the task of theory in aesthetics to provide a literal rather than a metaphorical account of aesthetic experience. For a metaphorical theory is a surrogate theory, and aesthetic theory with pretensions to truthfulness must forego metaphor and deal with the experience and phenomena of art in their own terms, that is, literally.

My intent here has been the necessary preliminary of pointing up the importance of developing a rigorous descriptive science of aesthetics based on a deliberate and careful examination of aesthetic experience on its own terms. This is not to imply that the distinctive characteristics and special values of aesthetic experience must be discounted or will be lost. For it is the *theory* of art which must develop into an empirical science and not art, itself, or the experiences it evokes. What this does mean, however, is rather that the opportunity here exists whereby we may achieve a fuller awareness of the conditions under which aesthetic experience may take place, of the significance of such experiences for human life, and of the role of art in human culture and how it may most effectively serve its; ends. But in pursuing the goal of an empirical aesthetics, we must observe the dictum, adapt the theory to art, not art to the theory. Only then will we be in a position to enhance the totality of human experience by the explicit recognition of the significance of its aesthetic aspect.

Undoubtedly this discussion leaves many questions yet unanswered, including the implication of this thesis for a great many problems in aesthetics, issues like the resemblance between aesthetic experience in the creation and in the appreciation of art, the role of beliefs in art, the

relationships of aesthetic experience to other distinguishable kinds of experience, in particular the practical, and the implications of the ideas developed here for criticism of art. Most important, however, is the need to elaborate a theory of aesthetic experience which will embody the critical results of the analysis we have just made and which will suggest a resolution of such traditional and current problems in aesthetics indeed, many of the criticisms voiced here presuppose a view of aesthetic experience rather different from the way it is commonly described. A descriptive analysis of such experience is therefore the task to which we should turn, and it is by doing this that aesthetics can hope to progress toward a firmly grounded theory of art.

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